



# *Mountain Shadow Farm* Reclaiming What Once Was . . .

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**T**he phrase “reclaiming what once was” may not make a lot of sense to many people, and it probably violates more than one journalistic rule. But that was the goal of Jerry Jones Sr. and Jerry Jones Jr. of Blount County when they began their wildlife management efforts on their farm. Everything they did was not only an attempt to bring their property back to where it was as both father and son remembered it growing up, but also to make it better than it was before.

Although Mountain Shadow Farm is situated in the rolling hills northwest of the town of Blountsville, the name didn’t come from its topography. Jerry Sr. said, “Back when I was a youngster I saw a movie, a western. The ranch in the movie was *Mountain Shadows Ranch* and that just stuck with me.”

According to Jerry Sr., his dad bought the original 20 acres in 1945 and made his living as a crop farmer – primarily cotton and corn. The small acreage wasn’t enough to feed a family, and he rented more farmland in the area in order to

make a “meager living.” In the late ’50s, the family purchased an additional 40 acres, and a few years later another 115 acres was added. The farm now covers 175 acres between the two men, and they manage it together as a TREASURE Forest.

The objectives on the farm today are wildlife management and recreation, with the main emphasis on bobwhite quail. As long as the farm was in row crops the quail population thrived, but in the early ’80s when the farm was converted to cattle the quail population began to decline. The quail population dropped from eight coveys to zero in just a few years. It has been the goal of Jerry Sr. and Jr. to manage the farm in order to re-establish the native quail. “For a long time you could hunt all day and never find a bird,” according to Jerry Sr. “It was a sad day when quail disappeared from this property.”

Jerry Jr. agreed, saying he remembers tagging along with his father, grandfather, and uncle when he was young as they hunted quail on the property. It was

a sport loved by everyone in the family and when they began to manage the farm, quail was one of the priorities.

The entire farm is dedicated to wildlife, and the purpose of every activity done on the property is to enhance the wildlife habitat. The twelve food plots scattered around the farm are actively planted in warm and cool season foods including corn, soybeans, grain sorghum, millet, clover, wheat, sunflowers, and other things. These are either all left standing or mowed for wildlife. Chestnuts, bicolor, vitex, and autumn olive have been planted as well to provide for the many species of wildlife that have been attracted to the farm.

In recent years the two have experimented with a vine called “lab lab.” Out of Texas, this plant (*Lablab purpureus*, also called hyacinth bean, Indian bean, and Egyptian bean) is more digestible than kudzu and has a protein content of around 25 percent. One of the great things about lab lab is that it is not invasive like kudzu.





Everything they plant on the property is done by soil sampling. Proper care is given and fertilizers are distributed according to soil samples. This provides for a healthier crop, along with cutting down on the cost of applying a fertilizer that a plant doesn't need.

Prescribed burning, a key forestry tool, is a necessity on the property for wildlife habitat. Fire is used to keep plants and shrubs from being overgrown, as well as to stimulate natural vegetation and regeneration. The Joneses are currently on a three-year prescribed burn rotation and it is working well for them.

Along with all of the food plots and planting that the pair have done, they also take advantage of what nature has provided on the property. Many of their management practices are designed to enhance the native vegetation on the



*Opposite and top: Corn planted this year will provide food for the many wildlife species at Mountain Shadow Farm. Above: Jerry Jones Jr. (left) and Jerry Jones Sr.*

*Photos by Coleen Vansant*

farm. Everywhere you look there are waves of yellow partridge pea blooms, one of the native plants to benefit from prescribed burning. They also maintain and fertilize other natural growers like honeysuckle, native grasses, and native shrubs. The native blackberries on the place are nurtured by fertilizing and mowing, with a great effort not to let them get too old and grown over. Both of the men's wives also take advantage of the berries for jelly. Since Jerry Jr. and

his wife witnessed a deer grazing on morning glory vines, they have let these grow along the edges of their fields as well.

The greatest obstacles the Joneses have faced are getting rid of the bermuda and fescue grasses that were left over from the days when the farm was in cattle, and they have a constant battle with privet hedge. They have also instituted measures to eliminate beaver and the many, many tame and wild domestic cats that frequent the farm for an easy meal.

Although the Jones family began managing to enhance the quail population, they soon realized that the practices they were implementing were benefiting many more species as well. They say now as many as 30 different species can be found on the property from time to time, with a lot of them being "residents." Rabbits are plentiful along with numerous species of non-game birds, foxes, coyotes, hawks, and deer. Father and son are actively involved in both Ducks and Quail Unlimited.

"In the mid-'40s there were no whitetail deer in this area," said Jerry Sr. He laughs when he describes the first one he ever saw. He was bird hunting when his dog pointed something in the brush. A big buck jumped up, and he says he doesn't know who was the most frightened, him or the dog. This past year the first deer (an 8-point) was harvested on the property, and they will probably begin to harvest more to keep the population manageable. There are six wildlife observation houses on the farm, along with several tree stands to accommodate hunters.

## Wildlife Preserve

For several years the pair ran a "pay to hunt" program on the property. They established a quail hunting preserve, complete with a log cabin to house hunters and a dog kennel on site. Although there were not enough native quail to sustain the paid hunt program, they released quality pen-raised quail to

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*Native partridge peas are encouraged to grow around this pond.*

supplement the program. Both say they were not necessarily interested in operating a paid hunt business, they just wanted to let people come in to hunt, work with good dogs, experience being outdoors, and have a good time.

What revenue they generated went back into the property for habitat improvements. They used this opportunity to help offset some of the costs of the constant upkeep of the property. After a few years, health problems for both of the men prohibited them from continuing the program. Now the two take pleasure in hunting for themselves, as well as allowing friends and family members.

The Joneses still keep dogs on the property, four Brittany spaniels and one German shorthair, and they do all of the training themselves. They have taken the dogs to several schools and civic groups, talking about hunting and demonstrating how the dogs work. Both men enjoyed participating in a Boy Scout Camporee with around 700 scouts.

## Recreation and Education

Recreation is also important at Mountain Shadow Farm. Along with providing hunting opportunities, there are also four ponds for fishing. Family and neighbors enjoy picnicking, walking or riding horses on the roads and trails, bird and wildlife watching, and just enjoying the numerous wildflowers on the place.

Because of its diversity and beauty the farm has also hosted garden club meetings, Master Wildlife programs,

“Forest in the Classroom,” Bassmasters, a local archery group, and the county TREASURE Forest Chapter.

## TREASURE Forest

Mountain Shadow Farm was certified as a TREASURE Forest in 2003 and won the prestigious Helene Mosley Award in 2004. The Joneses said they were thrilled and surprised to win the award and were greatly honored by being recognized for their stewardship efforts. They agree that the thing that attracted them to the TREASURE Forest program was that it was not about growing trees. “I thought it was about tree growers,” stated Jerry Sr. “When you read their aim and what they’re looking for, it was what we were trying to do. It was a perfect fit.”

Jerry Jr. says that they had been practicing good stewardship for a long time when they picked up a brochure on the program at a wildlife show in Birmingham.

“When I first heard about it, I thought you had to be a timber producer. We’re not interested in trees, except for the wildlife and aesthetic value.” He adds that what he liked most about the program was that it fit with the goals for their property and not the other way around.

Both men are active members of the Blount County Chapter of the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association. Jerry Sr. is now on the Board of Directors, and Jerry Jr. has served on the Board of Directors and is currently the organization’s president.

## Conclusion

Both Joneses are retired but say they probably do a lot more work now than when they went into the office every day. The difference is, now they get up every morning and enjoy doing what they want to do.

In regard to the future, “it will keep getting better, and better, and better,” says Jerry Sr. “I’ve got somebody [Jerry Jr.] that will carry on the tradition and hopefully the grandkids will do the same.” ☸



*This area has been prepared to plant a winter food crop.*